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WOMEN AS WITNESS TO DESIRE: POWER LINES AND STRUCTURES IN *LANVAL* BY MARIE DE FRANCE.

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This article interrogates the role of women in Marie de France's Lanval by examining how female figures function as symbolic witnesses and repositories of desire within the feudal court. Drawing on theoretical frameworks advanced by Julia Kristeva, the study argues that medieval literature constructs women as the Other, whose absence of personhood provides a space for the projection of male desire, lending itself to the pursuit of honour and spiritual ascendance. Through a detailed analysis of the dual portrayals of the fairy queen and the feudal queen, the article demonstrates how these figures, though superficially subversive, ultimately reinforce the gendered hierarchies of courtly love. The narrative techniques employed in Lanval—from lexical choices and character juxtapositions to the symbolic settings of the forest and court—reveal a deep reliance on the female form to validate the male quest for refinement and societal worth. By contrasting the two characters, the article underscores how women are reduced to 'objects of exchange', serving primarily to witness and substantiate male progress (Kristeva, 1981, p. 50). In doing so, it highlights the inherent tension between the subversive potential of Lanval and its structural adherence to patriarchal values, offering insight into the complex interplay of desire, power, and gender in medieval narratives.

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Historically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the Woman: Woman is sedentary, [...] It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so". Writes Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse* (pp. 13-14), establishing the role of absence, otherwise understood as the Other, in relations of love and desire. Within the context of late 12th and early 13th century French medieval literature, love and desire are wrought by the feudal hierarchy, and consequently, female personhood is warped to fit this structure. As Barthes suggests, the 'shape' she gives to absence plays an essential role in the justification and self-legitimization of courtly literature, which contrasts with the behaviour of other genres such as the *fabliaux*, which expose the arbitrary nature of such hierarchies. In particular, the chivalric romances characterised as *fin'amor* often engage in a false subversion that arguably reinforces the popularly held ideals of the period. In fact, love within the Medieval court, in all its modalities, was closely intertwined with the privileging of asceticism, a form of severe self-discipline practiced in pursuit of spiritual refinement, that emerged from Christianity. Corbellari (2009), Guerreau-Jalabert (1997, 1999), and Duby (1978) can be used in tandem to understand this occurrence; the Lady of the court, a vessel for absence, becomes an idol for her male counterpart to worship and aspire after. To maintain her status as an ideal, she is held in narrative stasis, whilst her male counterpart strives forward towards his goal of love and, in turn, honour, the fulfilment of their relationship acting as proof of his societal worth.

Julia Kristeva analyses this occurrence, both literary and cultural, in *Desire in Language: A semiotic approach to literature and art* (1980) through the binary of the *Other* and the *Same*. She states that there is a "necessity for this society to give itself a permutative center, an *Other* identity, which has no value except as an object of exchange among members of the *Same*" (p. 50**).** This centre is held by the woman, the *Other*, and consequently, women exist not as active participants but as witnesses to their own permutation in value and objectivity. This centre is 'blind', and 'mystifying', it expands 'out to infinity (of "nobility" and "qualities of the heart"), erasing disjunction (sexual difference), and dissolving into a series of images (from the angel to the Virgin)' (p.50). Its greatest task, however, remains to reflect the identity of the Same.

In Lanval, Marie de France plays upon the character tropes of the chivalric narrative, exploring its subversion through two female characters: the fairy Queen or 'la pucele' and the feudal Queen or 'la reine'. Arguably, however, this subversion only runs skin deep, as the narrative maintains a deep structural reliance on the presence of the Other. It depends upon its female characters' symbolic force for completion, a phenomenon Kristeva understands as the attribution of a structural role to the 'Other (Woman), within which is projected, and with which is later fused the Same (the Author, Man). At the same time there was produced an exclusion of the Other (...).' (p.49). This dependency can be examined through pistes of character and setting analysis, lexical engagement, and an examination of how the poem adheres to and distances itself from the structures of the Medieval court, in which female characters are bound by their symbolic power and structural significance.

I. Establishing the role of women within the politics of the Medieval Court

Writing in *Retour sur l'amour courtois* (2009) Alain Corbellari defines the terms 'fine', 'fole', and bone, to distinguish between three different modalities of love in medieval narratives. 'Fol'amor' signifies love that causes disequilibrium due to an excess of sexuality. Such relations are physical. They can be understood as two people in constant motion: the transfer of desire from one body to another. 'Bon'amor' is the opposite, denoting conjugal love, akin to that between a king and his people, complete stability, stasis, and an end to desire. In the context of Kristeva's narrative analysis, conjugal relations are ones in which fusion has already occurred. Andreas Capellanus, a clergyman and scholar, wrote in his 12th-century treatise[1] on love *De Amore*[2] that marital relations could not contain true love, 'for what is love if not an inordinate desire to receive passionately a furtive and hidden embrace?' (p. 106). It is in the final mode, 'fin'amor', that such embraces are found.
Fin'amor is the model of the elite and holds an exalted position. It designates the love shared between a knight and his lady. Corbellari establishes fin'amor as a type of love defined by ideas of 'purification and perfection'; it has 'refinement [...] at the heart of its preoccupations' (2009, p. 379)[3]. This refinement is born in part from self-restraint, as exemplified by Capellanus' instruction that

love should not be avaricious, and it should not exceed its object (p. 91). Such restraint is in line with the wider Christian ideals of asceticism of the period, wherein self-discipline becomes proof of a lover's spiritual purity. These modalities can be further understood through their lexical fields. In stories of fol'amor, such as La *Folie Tristan d'Oxford*, the two lovers call each other 'ami' or 'amie' (ed. Payen, 1974). The husband of bon'amor might refer to his spouse as *suer,* emphasising the familial aspect of marriage (Corbellari, p. 380), as witnessed in the fabliau *Les .iv. sohaiz saint Martin,* where a warring married couple do not call each other by name but 'suer' and 'vilain', meaning peasant (Bloch, 2013, pp. 741-745). In narratives of *fin'amor*, however, the woman is most often *La Dame*, or 'The Lady'. The object of the knight's desire therefore occupies a higher position than his own, and to an extent, this is part of the elevation and refinement that defines *fin'amor*. Perhaps the most poignant instruction found in *De Amore* of this regard is that lovers 'shalt always strive to belong to the Knighthood of love' (p. 91). Such gendered language, knighthood being something that only men can partake in, divides the participants of *fin'amor* into two distinct localities, the active and the passive. Whilst men are judged by their knightly abilities, women are regarded for their beauty and character, the crown of all desire. The lady, in her elevated position, is an idol of restraint. *Fin'amor* consequently distinguishes itself from the other modalities of love due to this binary. Whilst the lovers of *fol'amor* are in a state of excess or agitation, and the married couple of *bon'amor* are held in stasis through lack, *Fin'amor* can equally be represented as a male body in motion whilst the female body holds still.

Guerreau-Jalabert (1999, 1997) establishes fin'amor as an exercise in sociability rather than love. She calls it the 'great undertaking' (1997, p. 237) of the medieval world, where love's practice entertains and regulates sexuality. This assessment reaffirms Capellanus' 'textbook' conception, which presents love as a series of rules that must be followed rings true, as well as Corbellari's conception of fin'amor as a means of knightly progression. Guerreau-Jalabert emphasises the fact that the literature of the medieval period was primarily an act of self-definition and self-legitimisation by the nobility and clarifies that the elevation of the self, inherent to fin'amor is, at its core, a way of socialising male desire. In the 12th century, there was a certain amount of accordance and competition between religious culture and the culture of the nobility; the ideals of asceticism and denial were at odds with the material wealth and luxury that the nobility possessed. Therefore, the ideal of spiritual asceticism prevalent in the literature can be understood as a way for the nobility to give their position legitimacy. Under the influence of the Church, an excess of sexual desire was unacceptable; however, if women become idols of purity and refinement, the regulation of lust can be reframed as a moral exercise. Combined with the period's belief in Platonic ideals, wherein beauty was understood as a moral good, sexual desire undergoes a purification. The dominant position of the woman within such relations is a way of legitimising their sexuality, exalting it for its own sake. A type of 'spiritualised flesh' (Guerreau-Jalabert, 1999, p. 113)finds host in the woman's body, and as a result, through its pursuit, the knight can claim to transcend the boundaries of the self. Love becomes a 'motor for [male] spiritual progress' as its pursuit encourages 'the knight to surpass himself' (p. 113). Therefore, the true transgression of fin'amor isn't the extra-marital relationship, but the Knight surpassing himself.

Returning to De Amore, Capellanus suggest lovers should not love 'in excess' (p. 91), signalling the importance of restraint in romance. When we map the concepts of fin'amor and bon'amor over the same locale, the compound of 'lady-saint' an also be understood as 'lover-wife'; La Dame introduced by Corbellari is also the conjugal suer. She is not, however, the ami of fol'amor. She is not an active participant, an equal, but an ideal. The same characteristic that defines the perfect lady-lover also confirms her status as a good wife: submission. As a result, the ideal woman in narratives of fin'amor can be understood as an idol of sublime passivity, in which her personhood is excess. Her greatest value is as a witness to her male counterpart's achievements.

Duby (1978) elaborates upon the position of La Dame, bringing her into focus within the context of a tripartite conception of the Lord's family as a device of sociability, witnessed at events such as the tournament: 'Three persons [The Lady, the Lord, and their heir]. Three functions. Three moral requirements.' (p. 363)[4] La Dame symbolises lineage, prosperity, and fertility, reinforcing her husband's position as a competent lord. Her husband has his wife become host to 'simulacres de désir', simulacrums of desire, an effigy for the vassals to

worship. He states: ‘In what is known as amour Courtois, it is La Dame that is at stake, not the maiden, too innocent and easily won.’ (p. 364)[5] La Dame, whose personhood conflicts with her characterisation as an idol, exists at a precipice of possibility that serves as a perpetual motivator. In using the word ‘simulacrum’ Duby underlines the fragility of fin’amor. It is arguably little more than an imitation of love, a projection of male desire. The true intentions of women within these relations are irrelevant, as it is their potential as witness, vessel, which holds significance. The greatest power given to the noblewoman of the medieval court noblewoman is purely symbolic.

II. *Lanval*: genre subversions and adhesions

Ultimately, Corbellari, Duby, and Guerreau-Jalabert illustrate that in courtly love narratives, the ideal woman is reduced to a passive object—her beauty and virtue serve as a mirror for the knight’s pursuit of honour and spiritual ascendance. This idealisation enforces a gendered hierarchy, where the woman’s role is primarily to reflect male achievements, leaving her own identity subsumed under the weight of this task. Here, female figures are not celebrated for their agency; their personhood is diminished and redefined to support a rigid, gendered hierarchy. The different modalities of love (fin’amor, bon’amor, and fol’amor) each impose a structured script upon female characters, thereby reinforcing the medieval court’s social and symbolic order. Applying this analysis to Marie de France’s lai, Lanval, we encounter a young knight who, despite his abilities, is neglected by the court, as well as two juxtaposing female characters, the fairy Queen and the feudal Queen. The fairy queen, with her ethereal and transformative allure, initially disrupts conventional expectations by offering Lanval a glimpse of a liberatory, otherworldly desire—one that hints at the possibility of transcending traditional feudal boundaries. Yet, her role remains tethered to that of the Other, her value ultimately derived from her capacity to mirror and enhance the knight’s quest for refinement. In contrast, the feudal queen epitomises the entrenched ideals of fin’amor: her gestures of desire are formal and hollow, emblematic of a static, institutionalised order that upholds the norms. Through Lanval’s interactions with these two figures, Marie de France illustrates the tension between subversion and conformity in courtly love, effectively mirroring the earlier argument that women’s significance in these narratives is less about personal identity and more about their function as silent validators of male honour and societal worth.

II.a. Lines 1-214: Strangers and strange lands; characters and setting.

The titular knight of *Lanval* is undoubtedly an outsider, a foreign prince residing in King Arthur’s court. He is described as:

huem estranges, descunseillez
mult est dolenz en alter terre

A man alone, with no counsel
A stranger in a strange land[6]

Despite his efforts, he is never acknowledged within the court, which eventually results in him riding out into the forest, alone, and coming to rest at the banks of a brook, having abandoned his horse moments before. This scene is heavy with imagery. The forest in Medieval literature represents an unknown. It is a site of penetration and possibility for knights (Duby, 1978, p. 368). The forest occupies a feminine position that contrasts with the harsh physicality of the court and its man-made walls; it is the locale of the *Other*, often represented by the Supernatural. In turn, the horse Lanval abandons is intensely connected to knightlihood and the masculinity of the court, an association demonstrated by the word for horse *cheval* existing inside the word for knight *chevalier*. Lanval is therefore leaving behind one world in exchange for another. The image of the stream reinforces this; water has a close association with the supernatural and represents as a portal between two worlds, an ephemeral barrier. Consequently, Lanval first encounters the fairy Queen in a situation teeming with symbolism, and such abundance becomes a character motif for her. Initially, the fairy Queen’s characterisation is destabilising. Images of extreme luxury and richesse (l. 45-55, l. 83-93) contrast with the referent ‘la pucele’ (the maiden) (l. 93, 549, 601, 638), and significantly, no male characters assist in her characterisation, no father, no husband. She is first introduced to Lanval through two female attendants. The referent ‘la pucele’ itself conflicts with both Corbellari and Duby’s assertions that it is *La Dame* who acts as a vessel for the Knight’s affections and consequently occupies Kristeva's ‘false centre’.

As previously established, fin'amor is self-contained, held within the bounds of the court, however Marie de France begins her Lai by establishing characters and setting that actively oppose these confinements. Nonetheless, such a characterisation aligns with Kristeva's description of a 'mystifying' Other of infinite possibility; descriptions of her beauty, (l. 80-106) are typical of the period, drawing upon images such as the lily and the rose and the startling whiteness of her face, neck, and chest, yet also surpass all previous understandings of loveliness. It is the fairy Queen who first approaches Lanval and promises to fulfil his every desire if he returns her affections. Lanval accepts, and they consummate their relationship from the start, another deviation from chevalric romance form. As the lai continues, Lanval transforms and transcends the alienation he experiences at the beginning of the poem. Notably, Marie de France describes Lanval as distributing dons amongst his people. Le don, a monetary gift signifying honour and approval, was a major tool of maintaining sociability in the medieval period; one of the qualities a knight was expected to embody was largesse, generosity, and in giving out such gifts, Lanval is cultivating his esteem as a knight. At the beginning of the poem, the King's refusal to acknowledge Lanval is directly linked to his lack of financial recompense. After Lanval's encounter with the Fairy Queen however, he takes on the role of most benevolent financier, subverting the feudal script:

Lanval donout les riches duns,
[...],
Lanval donout or e argent
N'i ot estrange ni privé
A ki Lanval n'eüst doné.

Lanval was now the richest donor,
[...]
Lanval did all men every honour[7]:
To stranger and to citizen
Lanval would gladly have given. (l. 209-214)

Notably, Lanval's generosity extends to strangers as well, whereas the King chooses to overlook Lanval for the very same reason. By establishing this contrast, Marie de France begins to foreshadow Lanval's eventual surpassing of the king and the feudal hierarchies that he was previously bound by.

II.b. La reine and la pucele: further character juxtapositions

Following this transformation, Lanval starting to achieve both monetary and spiritual fulfilment independently of his Lord, Marie de France brings *la reine* into play. The queen is introduced at a window, elevated above around thirty of the King's vassals. This positioning can be interpreted as a physical depiction of the internal structures of *fin'amor*, which exemplifies the Queens role as principal witness of the court**.** The Queen is held in a superior position, looking down upon the knights, supported by the structure of the court. She then descends to the garden, surrounded by thirty maidens. Whilst the other Knights converse with the ladies, Lanval remains alone, thinking of his lover. The Queen approaches him to proposition him and declares she has loved him and thought him honourable for a long time, and that she is willing to give him whatever he desires (l. 239-314). When compared with that of the fairy Queen however, her behaviour reveals a hollow core.

In lines 110-112, Marie de France creates a sense of unity between Lanval and the fairy Queen, as she too has chosen to leave her home, to meet Lanval, and consequently her identity as an outsider reflects Lanval's own.

Lanval [...] beus ami,
Pur vus vinc jeo fors de ma tere:
De luinz vus sui venue quere !

Lanval, [...] my friend, my dear,
I left my lands to come where you are;
To find you I have come so far! (l. 263-266)

The Queen's offer is absent of a similar sacrifice, and the repetition imparts the superficiality of her emotions.

Lanval, mut vus ai honuré
E mut cheri e mut amé
Tute m'amur poëz aveir.

Lanval, I really do respect you,
I really care, I really love,
And you can have all my love. (l. 113-116)

Similarly, the fairy queen offers her love as a motivator, a guide, for Lanval's moral and spiritual fulfilment, and her love is positioned as the crowning gift she can bestow upon him, all-encompassing and unbounded.

Se vus estes pruz e curteis, Emperere ne quens ne reis
N'ot unkes tant joie ne bien,
Kar jo vus aim sur tute rien

Be valiant and courtly in everything, and no emperor,
count or king
Ever had joy or blessings above you;
For, more than any thing, I love you. (l. 113-116)

Meanwhile the Queen, unable to reflect his true desire, offers him love, alongside anything else he might want, and, in her final lines, grounds her speech in the physical, offering herself up. She is unable to provide Lanval with a spiritualised love, and so instead cuts her deal with her flesh.

Kar me dites vostre voleir!
Ma druërie vus ostrei :
Mut devez estre liez de mei !

Tell me what you want! I expect you
Must be happy at what I say.
I'm offering to go all the way. (l. 267-270)

At first glance the Queen's request can be interpreted as departure from *fin'amor*. She has shed her role as witness and has moved towards active seduction. Nonetheless, her activity can be interpreted as an overcorrection of Duby's *simulacrum*, a consequence of her husband's neglect. She offers Lanval love and honour in the hopes that he will reintegrate himself into the natural structure of the court; return himself to her husband's sphere of influence. Although when Lanval first declines he cites his loyalty to the King as his reason for refusing, as the Queen continues to insist herself upon him, Lanval refuses more strongly, declaring that he has no use for the Queen's affections as he already has a lover, and even the lowliest of her maids would surpass the Queen in terms of beauty (l. 291-302). The Queen reacts to this insult by immediately reporting Lanval to her husband, the King, accusing Lanval of behaving *dishonourably*. From this point on the Queen's motivations become wholly indistinguishable from her husbands, when Lanval is taken to court, the king is the sole plaintiff (l. 445, 451). This underlines the Queen's status as an idol to desire, a hidden channel of mercenary control; Lanval is persecuted because he does not participate in her worship.

II.c. Narrative Resolution

The Queen's sole power lies in simulation; however, this power is muted due to the existence of the fairy Queen. The inclusion of the supernatural means that the Queen no longer occupies the role of *Other*, she instead belongs to the Same of the nobility. She is stripped of the verdant symbolism that 'the center' is expected to hold. The Fairy Queen, on the other hand, fulfils the role of ultimate *Other*. Her abundance, her beauty, her ability to reflect whatever image is required of her, Marie de France's character easily takes on the role Kristeva describes. After Lanval is put on trial, she comes to his aid on a white palfrey, cloaked in purple-red silk, a hawk at her hand. Marie de France dedicates 65 lines alone to describe her beauty and the awe it inspires, prompting even the king to rise from his chair to greet her. While she continues to be referred to as 'la pucele' with golden hair and a pale face, she is draped in the costume of a King (l. 549-614), her beauty blending with her supernaturality to overpower the court. As a result, it is the fairy Queen's preeminent beauty, the strength of this image, that frees Lanval of his accusers. If the *Other* is to be understood as an object of exchange, the Fairy Queen is of otherworldly value, and it is this value that causes Lanval to cast the Queen aside. Despite the Fairy Queen's subversive characterisation, her main role within the narrative is to empower Lanval, the richness of her image belongs to him.

The lai concludes with Lanval and the Fairy Queen leaving the court on horseback together, riding towards Avalon. Kristeva asserts that medieval narratives of this type conclude with the fusion of the Other with the Same, and this too, is what takes place in *Lanval* (Kristeva, p.49). As Lanval has joined with his Fairy Queen, he now surpasses all the humans at the court, he exists above the feudal system, and this is what precipitates his departure. Whilst Lanval has achieved an effective liberation, the reader is left to speculate what the ending of the Lai means for both the Queen and the fairy Queen. Throughout, both female characters are shaped by the reflective structure of the *Other* and the *Same*. No desire is not their own, but a reflection of desire that exists to serve the patriarchal feudal systems upon which love is wrought, each of them acting to serve the interests of their opposite, be it Lanval or the King.

III. Conclusion

To conclude, within medieval narratives such as Lanval, women are not agents, nor experiencers of love, but one of its instruments. When love is understood as a way of governing sociability, an exercise built upon feudal structures, women exist as objects of exchange. The power of the fairy Queen becomes a symbol of Lanval's power, her character proof of his own refinement, her beauty a symbol of his wealth. Both she and the Queen occupy privileged positions that ultimately serve to enrich their male equivalents, and their greatest occupation is to bear witness to male advancement. As John Berger would suggest: 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision.' (2008, pp, 50-51)

Footnotes

1. De Amore, also known as Traité de l'amour courtois positioned itself as an instruction guide on 'loving well', blending parody and allegory. The preface is addressed to Capellanus' 'dear friend Walter'. A large part of the text is dedicated to imagined conversations between men and woman from varying social classes, discussing how they experience love according to their societal position, as well as presenting a set of rules on how to love.

2. 1974 Edition, Chapelain, A. l. Traité de l'amour Courtois. (t. C. Buridant, Éd.) Paris: Klinskieck.

3. Translation is my own.

4. Translation is my own.

5. Translation and emphasis are my own.

6. Translation: Shoaf, J. P. (2005), University of Florida

7. In this translation, Judith P. Shoaf (2005, University of Florida) chooses to translate 'or et argent', literally 'gold and money' as 'honour', further emphasising the link between monetary gifts and societal approval.

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